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ABSTRACT

For the recent exhibition "Greater New York: New Art in New York Now," the Education Department at P.S.1 Contemporary Art Center, a large museum located in the Long Island City section of Queens, New York, organized a unique email-based discussion. The museum set up an e-mail address for most participating artists using the free Hotmail.com service. These addresses were displayed on P.S.1's website, where each artist had his/her own Web-page, and on sheets available in the museum lobby; and most importantly, the addresses were printed directly on to the wall labels in the galleries. This established a platform where public and artist could discuss the work and exchange ideas. The forum was easy, free, international, immediate, private, and almost intimate. The museum relinquished its monopoly over the interpretation of the art by opening up unmediated channels of communication between artist and public. (Author)

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Abstract

For the recent exhibition Greater New York: New Art in New York Now, the Education Department at P.S.1 Contemporary Art Center organized a unique email-based discussion. The museum set up an e-mail address for most participating artists using the free Hotmail.com service. These addresses were displayed on P.S.1's website, where each artist had his/her own Web-page, and on sheets available in the museum lobby; and most importantly, the addresses were printed directly on to the wall labels in the galleries. This established a platform where public and artist could discuss the work and exchange ideas. The forum was easy, free, international, immediate, private, and almost intimate. The museum relinquished its monopoly over the interpretation of the art by opening up unmediated channels of communication between artist and public.

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P.S.1 Contemporary Art Center

P.S.1 Contemporary Art Center is a large museum located in the Long Island City section of Queens, New York. Since 1971 under the direction of Founding Director Alanna Heiss, P.S.1 has showcased the work of thousands of local and international emerging artists and has been a defining force in New York's cultural life. Housed in a 100-year old school building, the museum organizes critically acclaimed solo and group exhibitions year-round and a summer outdoor live DJ Series. Since 1997, P.S.1's renovated building has been the largest contemporary art center in the world. The museum combines a world-class exhibition program, a prestigious National and International Artist Studio Residency Program, and a broad spectrum of education and public programs that serve its many audiences. In early 2000, P.S.1 became an affiliate of The Museum of Modern Art, New York, and looks forward to exploring the many possible collaborations with MoMA over the next years.

The education program

Since 1985, P.S.1's Education Department has offered its various audiences opportunities to get involved with the museum, the exhibitions, and the artists. Continuing P.S.1's commitment towards working closely with artists, the education program reflects a particularly active effort to bring a wide public in contact with the emerging artist community. Youth and family programs include art classes and art-making workshops with artists included in P.S.1 exhibitions. School programs include tours and art-making workshops with artists,

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collaborative on-line project development with artists, and a Teen Curators Series. Adult programs include panels and discussions bringing artists, writers, and curators in contact with the public, a Writers Series showcasing texts by emerging writers on pieces in the museum galleries, brochures and print materials with artist statements and interviews, and interactive Web projects.

Greater New York

In February 2000, P.S.1 and MoMA presented the result of their first curatorial collaboration. The exhibition *Greater New York: New Art in New York Now* began as an open-call for submissions, and several thousands portfolio submissions and hundreds of studio visits later, became a massive building-wide show for which 30 P.S.1 and MoMA curators brought together the work of over 140 New York-based artists who have emerged as vital, creative voices in their fields over the past five years. The exhibition turned out to be one of the most successful shows in the history of P.S.1, drawing thousands of visitors and critical acclaim. Hits to P.S.1's website, http://www.ps1.org, tripled over the course of the exhibition, as the museum hosted its most ambitious on-line exhibition to date, now on view at http://www.ps1.org/cut/tours.html. The many components that made up the exhibition contributed to its unprecedented success.

The E-Mail Project

One of the components initiated by the museum's Education Department was dubbed the E-Mail Project. A month before the opening of the exhibition, museum staff set up an e-mail address for each artist using the free Hotmail.com service. To better distinguish the newly created e-mail addresses, the following format was used:

lastname_greaterny@hotmail.com.

After receiving a long explanation of what the project required and the responsibilities that accompanied it, over 80 of the 146 artists included in the Greater New York exhibition agreed to join. All artists were shown how to use the service and how to access their private account. As an important step to ensure the success of the project, the artists were strongly warned that their participation required them to check the account several times a week and to respond to all relevant messages. Those not able to make that commitment were excluded from the project.

Each artist was made aware that the dialogue that occurred through the e-mails would not be screened by the museum and would be seen by the artist alone. Different from a "chat room" or a "bulletin board," the messages would not be posted on the museum website but would remain in the private Hotmail inboxes of the recipient artist. Since no institutional control was possible, all were warned of the possibility for "spam" or other unwanted or unwelcome messages. Furthermore, since there was no precedent for the project, the quantity and quality of the messages remained completely unknown and impossible to predict. The museum was eager to showcase selected messages on the P.S.1 Greater New York Website, and artists were encouraged to forward particularly interesting messages to the museum Website staff.

The e-mail addresses were then displayed in three places:

- on P.S.1's Website, where each artist had his/her own personal Web page
- on sheets available in the museum lobby for visitors to take away
- on the wall labels of the artists' works in the galleries

Through the Website, a local and international audience was able to contact the artists directly by sending them direct and private e-mail messages. In the Greater New York site, each artist had his or her personal Web page, complete with an image, an exhibition history, a selected bibliography, an artist statement, and an e-mail address. When and if they were forwarded to museum staff, excerpts from e-mail correspondence were also posted in the artist's page, adding new insight to what was an invaluable resource for information about significant up-and-coming artists.

Visitors to the museum could take home with them an "address book" of e-mail addresses for the artists. One computer was placed in the museum lobby, but was meant for browsing the Web site, not for sending e-mails. Since e-mail correspondence requires users to log into a personal home or office account, visitors could not use the computer on-site at P.S.1 to correspond with the artists. Instead, museum-goers could take home a free pamphlet with the complete lists of existing e-mail addresses for Greater New York artists and compose a message at a more comfortable time and place.

Most importantly, visitors in the galleries, when consulting the wall label for the usual name and title information, were confronted with the possibility of communicating directly with the artists in the exhibition. By simply adding a line to the standard museum wall label, the presence of the E-Mail Project was carried from the digital world of the Internet to the physical world of the galleries themselves, an exercise which remains unusual for many web projects.

Jeremy Blake Angel Dust 1999 Digital projection Courtesy Feigen Contemporary, NY blake_greaterny@hotmail.com

Table 1: A sample wall label from the exhibition, including an email address

Results

Several factors played a part in evaluating the results of the project. First of all, since there exists no pre-existing model with which to compare it, a comprehensive understanding of its successes and short-comings is difficult. In addition, the very nature of the project, and indeed one of its most significant and characteristic traits, was that the messages were kept in private e-mail accounts, inaccessible to museum staff. Any assessment was possible only by asking the participants to discuss what

they had received.

Once the exhibition closed, Education staff did indeed interview many of the artists in order to get an idea of the results. An important question was that of identifying the different types of users. Feedback from the artists revealed that e-mail messages could be divided into 5 roughly defined categories, here listed in no particular order:

- curators and gallery owners
- collectors
- writers participating in the Greater New York Writing Project
- the "unidentified" general public
- teachers

An obvious - but admittedly unanticipated - group of e-mail corresponders were local and international curators and gallerists. Partly due to its sheer size, to the involvement of The Museum of Modern Art, to an aggressive publicity campaign, and naturally, to the quality of the works, the exhibition received a significant amount of press in national and international papers and art magazines. Many curators, from New York galleries to prestigious institutions around the world, visited the exhibition and the exhibition Web site. Many of them took advantage of the E-Mail Project to contact artists and request additional information about their work, images, CVs, or studio visits. Artists engaged in continuous dialogue with curators and became involved in exhibitions in other spaces, from Houston to Berlin, London and Tokyo. Important to keep in mind is that many of the artists included in Greater New York were not yet represented by a commercial gallery, and this direct and facilitated link to curators proved very promising and helpful. A particularly potent example is that of a young and unrepresented artist receiving a personal message of interest from the Director of the Brooklyn Museum of Art, Arnold Lehman. Of course, artists already working with commercial galleries referred the interested curator to the appropriate person at the gallery to continue the correspondence. E-mails from curators, in the case of some artists, made up more than half of all messages received during the course of the show. This impressive tally was certainly a welcome by-product of the E-Mail Project, especially from the artists' point of view. Nevertheless, the project was conceptualized by the P.S.1 Education team more as a tool for outreach and for encouraging an open unmediated exchange of ideas and interpretations between a general public and the artists rather than as a way to further careers. This particular outcome of the project was not among the intended or sought-after goals, yet it stands undeniably as a prominent one.

Another frequent user of the e-mail addresses was the art collector. Once again, this audience is one which the initiative did not aim for, but was nevertheless significant. As with curators, artists were only too pleased to receive messages from collectors. One young artist, who had shown her work very little before her inclusion in Greater New York - she is now frequently featured in exhibitions in many New York galleries - was quite unprepared for the response from collectors, and sold all of her pieces within the first few weeks. She then spent the next many weeks telling collectors from across the country that all her work had been sold and that she was working on new pieces (as fast as she could, presumably). An issue that becomes immediately apparent is that of artists selling their work without going through the gallery that represents them. Of course, it is difficult to convince artists to divulge details concerning the sales of their artworks, but the opportunity to by-pass the gallery is one which surely crossed the mind of several.

The Greater New York Writers Project was another initiative of the Education Department and whose full description deserves a paper in itself. To accompany the open-call for artist submissions, the museum organized an open-call for writer submissions. Given the difficulty of articulating a cohesive theme and a concise curatorial essay for a show so heterogeneous in content, the exhibition catalogue was made up of texts selected from the group of emerging writers from the Writers Project. Approximately 100 texts were selected by a screening committee at P.S.1 and MoMA, giving the exhibition a broad scope of interpretation and insight. Texts varied from the art-historical to the creative, as theoretical essays appeared alongside more creative short stories or poems. The e-mail addresses proved to be an invaluable resource for many writers. Artists received messages filled with questions about their work, and later on, drafts of essays-in-progress. Eager that the text be included in the catalogue, artists responded to the questions generously and participated in what could be called an e-mail interview. Following is the beginning of one such response:

> Dear Brian, thanks for writing. I've had some contact through the P.S.1 e-mail address. Actually, more than I thought and a few helpful things for the future. I will see what I can fax to you. I will copy my bio and a review of one of my CDs. The Wire article you can find through my label - JDK. If you do a search on Radiantslab and JDK, you should be able to find the site. You can find some articles reprinted there. Attached to this e-mail is the bio, etc. If you can, also check out my small piece at Postmasters on W. 19th. Thanks a lot.

Given the artist's accessibility through the E-Mail Project, several writers who would not have done so otherwise decided to contribute a text. Indeed, many artists and writers, over e-mail of course, arranged to meet in person to further discuss ideas for the essay. Having the Greater New York e-mail addresses as resources for private exchanges that guaranteed a personal, tailored response prompted many young writers to move beyond the often paralyzing intimidation that is so common among people uninitiated in, and unfamiliar with, the New York art world.

The last two segments of the E-Mail Project audience were those that the project most aimed to reach. Most artists confirmed that about a third of the messages they received were from a more general public, unaffiliated with the professional art world. Art students, local residents, tourists, and the simply curious found the opportunity to communicate directly with the artist to be an unusual exercise in sharing thoughts, impressions, opinions, and suggestions. For example, for a piece involving a fully functional sauna in the museum's courtyard where visitors were invited to disrobe and join in, responses varied from the simply helpful:

> There is a good article on nudity in Austin at www.austinchronicle.com that you might be interested in.

to the more profuse:

> the next morning I woke up thinking about my experience and how it was that you managed to coax total public nudity out of me in such a short time. what was at play in your piece that made it so easy for me? and for my girlfriend as well for that matter? And more importantly, do

> those factors aproximate [sic] the culture of public bathing you described in Finland? You see, to us, the fact that the curtain is slightly parted, the changing room door does not actualy [sic] connect with the curtain, the ability to see people outside from behing [sic] the door, the clear plastic of the ventilation slot etc... all those elements created a kind of kinkyness. they all played on the notion of voyeurism. it was all a kind of game where the bather plays with how much or how little he is willing to show. every time he moves, he has to consiously [sic] decide to be descrete [sic](prudeish?) or not. Every time he notices an opportunity for exposure he is confronted with either exitement [sic] or fear or a realization of shame about that fear. It is therefore key to the experience that it be a repetition of the same series of decisions. with each cycle, the bather may become more daring (or less so). that daring evolves very quickly over those forty five minutes because the bather has to make those kinds of decisions so often. In any case, I would really appreciate it if you could write me back and tell me a little bit about what role you think sexuality plays is your piece.

People seemed to be unusually frank and almost vulnerable in their responses:

> Your video piece was very endearing. Well, that makes it sound almost cuddly. It was also kind of frightening. There was some suggestion of violence, to me. Maybe I associate circuses and carnivals with mayhem.
>
> Do you consider this work to be a product of your Colombian heritage, or is it strictly an illustration/embodiment of the five physical dimensions?

Straight-forward "fan letters" were also very common. Instead of feeling the need to ask questions, people enjoyed being able to simply express their enthusiasm for the piece. Artists read these letters with great appreciation. Repeatedly, artists mentioned that these types of letters are a missing component in the art world: rarely does an artist receive a letter of praise from an unknown exhibition visitor. Most of the time, feedback exists only in critical reviews in the press or through friends. Indeed, many artists saved and treasured these short "fan e-mails." Following is one of the favorite notes received by one of the artists. It is written by a young student who visited the museum on a class trip:

> To Artist,
>
> I recently visited P.S. 1 with my school, I go to The Ursuline School in New Rochelle. I choose your piece as my favorite. I thought it was very creative and calming. I enjoyed the way the cotton candy actually moved with the music. I also liked the split screen which made it look like it was a mirror image. The music was soothing and watching the cotton candy was amusing. I think your idea was very original and creative. I didn't understand the music so i was happy that there was a translation. Please write back. Thank you.

In addition to their students, many teachers used the e-mail address to get in touch with artists in order to better prepare lectures or workshops for their classes. Several artists sent teachers ideas for workshop projects or provided them with a more elaborate explanation of their work. After a class visit to the museum, a teacher gave her students an assignment to use the e-mails to contact an artist of their choice and ask him or her a specific set of questions. Some artists were bombarded with 20 messages from 8-year old children and patiently answered their questions. One curious and courageous artist, taking advantage of the anonymity of e-mail, actually attended the lecture of a college professor who had been in touch with her about her work, simply to hear what the lesson would discuss.

Used to more ordinary and "safer" responses to artworks that appear in Bulletin Boards or are heard at panel discussions and public forums, the P.S.1 Education Department was pleased to see an exchange of ideas that seemed less inhibited than in many other systems and strategies for gathering audience feedback.

A reporter for the online zine FEED, Claire Barliant, independently interviewed several participating artists for an article. Noting the absence of Web art in Greater New York, the reporter named the E-Mail Project as the museum's stab at including the Internet in the exhibition. Her conversations with artists suggested a mixed result, some artists receiving a significant amount of correspondence, but others voicing disappointment in the turnout. The article noted a particularly intriguing occurrence, "prov[ing] the elasticity of the e-mail project" (Barliant, 2000), where an artist not included in the exhibition nevertheless created a greaterny@hotmail.com account for himself.

Implications for Museum Outreach

The Greater New York E-Mail Project is an intelligent and effective strategy for engaging an exhibition audience. Museums across the world have tried many different methods and systems to foster a relationship with their visitors, ranging from docent tours, art classes for children, and museum-school partnerships to scholarly lectures and film screenings, not to mention merchandise and brand names. Rarer, however, are attempts to put the public, or rather, the publics, in direct contact with the artists. This is a commitment that P.S.1 has always maintained.

The strongest aspect of the E-Mail Project is what it stands for. The FEED magazine article mentioned above determined that since artists did not receive an overwhelming amount of insightful and intellectually provoking messages, the project as a whole failed in its purpose as an effective forum for dialogue. On the contrary, the project succeeded even before anyone put fingers to keyboard. Whether they were consulting the wall label, visiting the website, or taking the e-mail address book home, viewers of Greater New York were confronted with an exhibition interested less in convincing its public of a specific curatorial viewpoint or appreciation of art, than in providing a stimulus for others to consider and interpret. By adding e-mail addresses into the exhibition, Greater New York curators opened up important channels of personal and private interpretation and evaluation.

Curators, and the museums that legitimize them, have traditionally been the authors of "correct" and "incorrect" understanding of art and gatekeepers of good and bad taste. Exhibitions have been vehicles and

frameworks through which curators and their museums tell their viewers how to think about art. Little or no room is left for the visitor to develop, much less articulate, his or her own meaning for the works. In recent years, an increased interest on the part of museums and curators in seeking the participation of the audience has spawned non-linear exhibition design and layout, education and outreach programs, including bulletin boards (both physical and digital), interactive website projects, and "meet the artist" events, among other many examples. More and more, especially in contemporary art museums, the visitor's input is sought after and legitimized. This trend is fueled by the belief that leaving space for public participation makes the museum less of an intimidating fortress for the elite and more of an appealing and accessible center for shared ideas.

The E-Mail Project functions with similar goals and post-modern theoretical roots but brings new energy to an overly-saturated world of museum outreach initiatives. The project's simplicity is deceiving: the mere appearance of the e-mail address on the wall label, on the website, or in the lobby has the symbolic effect of encouraging discussion and debate. Viewer opinions and impressions are suddenly acknowledged and legitimized before any such opinion or impression has even been written down. The negotiations around the content of the exhibition are removed from the hands of the curator alone and extended to include anyone interested in joining. The project provides visitors with an open channel for the pursuit and development of their own personal interpretations and associations. Indeed, the personal e-mail addresses were communication tools as much as they were symbols for a democratization of the understanding of art. In effect, the simple act of displaying the artist's availability to discuss the work, unsupervised by museum staff - in the shape of an e-mail address - points to the willingness on the part of the curators to relinquish their monopoly over a "correct" interpretation of the artworks.

Setting this project apart from other systems of audience outreach is its invisibility. E-mail correspondence provides both sender and recipient with a private, immediate and almost intimate medium of communication. Being part of over 140 included in the exhibition, many artists welcomed the intimacy the e-mails brought to their experience as participants in Greater New York. In a show of its scale, one-on-one communication and channels for feedback are difficult to establish, and the exchange of private e-mails provided a way for artists and audience to maintain a relationship with the show. As already noted, privacy helped audience members feel more comfortable about communicating with the artists. As is often the case in public forums and panel discussions, visitors can find it intimidating to voice their opinions, questions, or personal associations and interpretations, a difficulty easily overcome by the unmediated nature of e-mail messages. Especially important was the assurance that their comment would be heard and responded to. In the more public bulletin boards or feedback notebooks common in many museums, viewer contributions are rarely, if ever, answered or acknowledged. In this case, the corresponder had the luxury of a specific listener and could look forward to a reaction to an opinion or an answer to a question. This aspect of the project heavily contributed to the volume of messages sent and helped the museum position itself as the host for a tailored and careful platform for meaningful exchange. As many pedagogues have stated, education works best if it occurs through dialogue rather than monologue. Indeed, the E-Mail Project transformed the museum experience from monologue to dialogue: from quietly absorbing a curatorial stance (in public) to

actively negotiating the importance and meaning of the works (in private). It seems as if museums can use the Internet, or more specifically, e-mail, as an appropriate "tool for the task." Interestingly, museum education can be left as a private experience.

Other significant traits of the project are its cost-efficiency, its international reach, and its role in the actual gallery display of the exhibition. First, the E-Mail Project was completely free of cost. The museum could set up e-mail accounts on the free Hotmail.com service, after which the project was left in the hands of the public and of the artists. During the private exchange of messages, museum staff members were not involved in screening, editing, or maintaining the correspondence and could let it run its course. Second, by including the addresses on the museum Web site, the project was international in scope. Initiated by a comprehensive site which included images, bios, analytical and creative essays, and streaming sound and video, web-surfers from around the world sent artists their impressions and questions. Many artists noted that the wide reach of the website led to an exciting variety of opinions and remarks. While some artists received invitations to participate in exhibitions abroad, others heard from people with surprising reactions, sometimes written in a foreign language. This characteristic also suggests that one could set up a similar project for an exhibition in any location. Being in New York certainly helped keep attendance figures high, but an e-mail based dialogue could be an effective and successful component to exhibitions in any city in the world.

As briefly mentioned above, a final aspect rich in implications is the role played by the project in the galleries themselves. Including the addresses on the wall labels on one hand disrupted, or rather, redefined a traditional relationship between artwork and its viewer, and secondly, fully integrated the Internet as a central component in the exhibition. As one artist emphasized, the insertion of the e-mail address on the wall label adds new life to a long-standing standard in the techniques of museum display. A document which usually contains nothing more than factual information suddenly gains a certain open-endedness that can powerfully alter the viewer's experience with the work of art itself. Furthermore, the introduction of the universally understood "@" sign into the gallery space highlights the role played by the Internet in the physical experience of the works. No longer a marginal subsidiary to the physical display of the show in the form of an online-only project, the Internet is woven into the fabric of the exhibition itself. In addition to the e-mail addresses, selected texts from the Writers Project, all submitted to the screening committee over e-mail, were on view in the galleries. Interestingly, in her article for FEED magazine, Claire Barliant, noting that Greater New York did not include any artists who use the Web as their chosen medium, names the E-Mail Project as the Net.art segment of the exhibition (Barliant, 2000).

Limitations

Far from flawless, the project gained from its first incarnation several insights as to its limitations and possible improvements. A first limitation is that it may only be possible with relatively emerging artists. Since its success depends on the reliability of the artists to check their e-mail accounts and to respond to any mail, it is difficult to expect that world-renowned artists would be willing to invest the time and energy necessary. Immediately following Greater New York, P.S.1 presented

Around 1984: A Look at Art in the Eighties, with artists such as Peter Halley, Jenny Holzer, Julian Schnabel, Sophie Calle, and Anish Kapoor, among others. With very busy schedules and near-celebrity status, these artists would surely not have agreed to maintain an e-mail address. Artists in the beginning of their career, on the other hand, are more likely to take on the responsibility of corresponding with the general public over e-mail on an on-going basis.

Another problem lay in the quality and quantity of the e-mail messages themselves. For example, many artists complained of "spam" mail. Artists received dozens of messages from various mailing lists. Some artists took advantage of the network of e-mail addresses to publicize shows of which they were part, and many exhibition announcements were sent out. This problem is one that plagues all e-mail users and seems to be an unfortunate by-product, and one difficult to avoid, of the technology. Also, some artists received significantly more mail than others. With a show of its scale, it was impossible to guarantee that each artist would get an equal number of messages. Perhaps a smaller exhibition would lead to a more equal distribution of correspondence. Additional publicity might also have been helpful. Had the E-Mail Project been announced more formally on the exhibition print materials (press release, brochure, postcards), or even better, had it profited from its own press release or announcement card, it might have attracted more users. Again, the existence of the project was visible on the wall labels, on the Web site, and as a take-away pamphlet in the lobby, and not in any mailed or otherwise distributed materials.

One last suggested improvement is to stress the importance to artists of forwarding excerpts of particularly interesting messages to the museum staff, for Web posting. With artists acting as gatekeepers, the project could have profited from a larger amount of excerpted correspondences being made public. Not only would these short texts highlight the dynamic interaction going on behind the closed doors of the Hotmail addresses, but they also would act as a bulletin board moderated by the artists, and surely prompt more people to respond and react to the postings by sending messages of their own.

Conclusion

Greater New York and its use of the Internet and e-mail was an exciting and unique experience for all involved: museum staff, artists, and audiences. Emphasizing a space for an open, free, and private interpretation of the works on view, yielding unintended but beneficial results such as exhibition and sale opportunities for artists, reaching audiences of all ages and nationalities, and bringing new media to the forefront of museum outreach techniques, the E-Mail Project combined the complexities of the museum experience with the enthusiasms of the museum audience to create a one-of-a-kind synthesis of art and communication. It is surely a strategy that deserves the attention and consideration of education, curatorial, and new media museum professionals.

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